

Becoming a Better Listener

The key to having better communication with family members is improving your listening skills. Studies show that 70 percent of our communication time is spent listening. However, not enough of that listening time is spent really hearing and understanding what the other person is saying. By concentrating better and trying harder to relate to the person talking, we can train ourselves to become active, empathetic and understanding listeners.

The Magic is in Our Listening

Karl Menninger, the late founder of the world-renowned Menninger Clinic, said: "Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand."

Research demonstrates that job applicants are more likely to be offered positions when they allow the interviewers to do most of the talking. It is no wonder that most people value good listeners more than they do good talkers.

Listeners also have an advantage over talkers in that people can think approximately three times faster than they can talk, giving listeners extra time to ponder a talker's message and prepare a response. Speech rate is roughly 100 to 150 words per minute; thinking rate is 250 to 500 words per minute.

Imagine a family member or friend is confiding in you about a personal problem, loss, or misfortune. Immediately, your mind begins searching for the right thing to say. You feel pressured to at least say something. More importantly, what you say must be the right thing, such as a comment or a bit of advice that provides comfort.

Too often, we become preoccupied with finding some magic formula or phrase. We do not realize that the magic is in our listening, not in what we say. The real comfort we provide is more in our compassion as listeners than in our skills as problem-solvers or counselors.

A recent study found that one significant difference between happily and unhappily married couples had to do with listening and understanding. Spouses who felt they were listened to and understood regarded their marriage as happy. Spouses who thought they were often ignored felt their marriages were unhappy.

Children especially need adults to listen carefully to them. Paying close attention when your children share experiences models good listening habits for them. It is not necessary or possible to provide a "this-is-what-you-should-do" response every time your child may complain.

Listen carefully to your child's messages, and do not let your mind wander to what you may feel are more important, adult matters. Make what your child is saying to you the most important thing at the time.

Keys to Effective Listening

Listening is an art that can be learned. Try these tips the next time a family member is talking to you. These strategies are ideal for the workplace and the classroom, as well.

- **Motivate yourself to listen enthusiastically:** Before the other person even begins speaking, tell yourself that you're going to give this person and his or her message your full attention, with the potential reward being new knowledge and insight. Ask yourself what you can learn from this person.
- **Learn to be an active listener:** Be attentive to the other person's concerns. Try hard to understand their point of view, and empathize with their experiences by "putting yourself in their shoes."
- **Refrain from judging or disagreeing:** Instead, aim to understand.
- **Put emotions aside:** Try not to let feelings like anger or jealousy stand in the way of attentive listening.
- **Give the talker incentives to open up:** Make yourself available, listen carefully, and demonstrate your sincere eagerness to understand and hear their story. Use phrases like "Wow, go on!" or "That is very interesting."
- **Be patient:** especially with talkers who have a difficult time communicating, such as young children: Show them respect by letting them fully express their thoughts and problems.
- **Avoid distractions:** Focus your attention on the person you are listening to, and maintain eye contact with them. Choose a location that is not noisy or disruptive. Pick a quiet, neutral locale for your discussion where you both feel comfortable.
- **Do not interrupt the speaker:** Doing so demonstrates a lack of respect for the talker and breaks their chain of thought, leading to a mixed or incomplete message. Interruptions may also keep the speaker from opening up to you further.
- **Ask questions about anything you do not understand:** Too often we simply nod our heads and pretend we comprehend or relate to the things the other person is saying, leading to a future breakdown of communication. Effective listening requires true interpretation and comprehension of the speaker's message. Pick your spots carefully (so as not to interrupt the speaker), and ask for clarification.
- **Coax the speaker to reveal more:** Encourage sharing with questions like, "What are you thinking /feeling?" By reassuring the talker that you are genuinely interested and want to hear all the details, the person will feel more comfortable and convey a more complete message.
- **Listen with your entire body:** Show eagerness and empathy in your facial expressions. Nod your head to indicate that you understand. Use appropriate body language to demonstrate that the message is being received loud and clear.
- **Watch for the speaker's body language:** Hand gestures, physical mannerisms, tone of voice and intensity of the eyes can reveal more than the actual words being spoken.

- **Focus on listening, not responding:** If you think too hard about what to say next, how the talker's situation relates to your experience or how to solve the speaker's problems while the person is still talking, you will zone out and not hear what they are saying.
- **Use "I" statements rather than "you" statements:** Instead of saying "You always treat me like a child," say, "I don't appreciate when you treat me like a child."
- **Do not give up on a poor talker:** If the speaker is rambling, repeating themselves or losing your interest, try to be patient. Challenge the speaker to get to the point by asking specific questions like, "So what was the result?" or "What did you do next?"
- **React to the message, not the messenger:** Do not let your opinions or prejudgments of the speaker interfere with a sincere response. Repeat what the person said to you back to them in your own words to confirm the message they were trying to relate and demonstrate that you understood.

Resources

- American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org
- National PTA: www.pta.org
- U.S. Department of Education: www.ed.gov

Here when you need us.

Call: 800-858-6715

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNowSM

Web ID: SeattleEAP

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